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Still speaking to ourselves: leisure studies in a wilderness of multiple modernities

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ABSTRACT

During the last 30 years, leisure scholars have tended to split into specialists on sport, tourism, and other "little leisures". Meanwhile, the voices of scholars who continue to write about "big leisure" rarely travel beyond their own networks. This paper explains how leisure research and theory commanded wider audiences during the early and mid-twentieth century. This was in binary international political contexts in which democracies and fascist countries, then after 1945 capitalism and communism, each claimed to be offering a superior way of life. Since the "revolutions from below" in 1989, a binary has been absent. The capitalist market economy has spread globally, with no serious competitor. However, traditional national and religious cultures have not weakened. Also, the present-day world contains a mix of liberal democracies, managed democracies, and autocratic dynasties. We have entered an era of multiple modernities. Up to now, none have needed the theories and evidence of leisure scholars to legitimize the regimes. However, this paper identifies an emergent binary, created by economic competition between super-powers in South and East Asia and the West, which offer contrasting conceptions of a good life. It is argued that engagement with these differences is a route to renewed political relevance for global leisure studies in the 2020s and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Asia; capitalism; communism; consumer culture; democracy; fascism; leisure

Introduction

In 1999, Samdahl and Kelly expressed concern that leisure scholars were speaking only to one another. The situation in the 1990s was not quite as dire as their analysis of journal citations suggested. Schor's (1991) book, claiming that Americans were overworked, attracted wider scholarly and public attention, as did Robinson and Godbey's (1999) later rebuttal using time diary evidence. Robinson and Godbey were able to show that Americans were not working longer than in the past (Robinson, 1977), and were working fewer hours per year than their counterparts in Europe and East Asia's "tiger economies". That said, books on leisure published in previous decades were more likely to reach wider audiences. The two books on leisure that I wrote in the 1970s (Roberts, 1970, 1978) led to a news item and a feature article in the UK national press. This has not happened since then.

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Until the 1990s, the study of leisure was a Euro-North American project. Within these geographical limits, leisure studies seemed naturally international. Uses of free time and money were very similar, and the same differences by socio-economic status, gender, and age were encountered in all countries. Leisure findings travelled well. Yet despite the narrow geographical boundaries within which leisure studies existed, its scholars worked in binary international political contexts. Before 1939, Europe's democrats confronted fascists, while after 1945, the binary was capitalism versus communism. Each system claimed to offer its citizens a superior way of life. This international political context amplified the voices of leisure scholars as did inter-war political divisions within European countries, where trade unions and the political parties that they supported were demanding reductions in working time. Optimism about a future leisure society peaked in the 1930s (Snape, 2018). Scholars from diverse disciplines joined the debates. In 1930, the economist John Maynard Keynes (1930/2010) predicted that by the end of the twentieth century, a 15-hour work week would be standard.

Since the collapse of communism throughout the Soviet bloc between 1989 and 1991, the study of leisure has lost its binary, competitive, international political context. By then, "more free time" had ceased to be a principal demand of trade unions and political parties of the left. Simultaneously, the post-1989 globalization of the market economy has helped to spread the study of leisure beyond its earlier European, North American (and latterly also Australasian) boundaries. A new era of multiple modernities has arrived in which countries have not (yet) coalesced into a limited number of blocs. Maybe they never will. The binaries that formerly amplified leisure issues have gone, and leisure scholars alone cannot restore this amplifying context. Their voices need to be drawn out of the leisure studies silo by hungry political protagonists. That said, we shall see that there are prospects for new twenty-first century divisions with the West, Asian, and (possibly) Islamic countries offering different, competing visions of the good life. Then, once more, we leisure scholars may find that outsiders are listening and joining our debates.

1900–1939

Leisure Studies was not born in the 1960s when American colleges began opening departments and launching courses with the L word in their titles. Researching and developing theories about free time in industrial societies began before the end of the nineteenth century, then blossomed between the world wars (Snape & Pussard, 2013). Hours of work in extractive and manufacturing industries were being rolled back. Real incomes for people in employment were rising. Department stores serving the general public began opening and modern consumer advertising was born. Radio, movie palaces, and recorded music competed for people's time and money with the modern sports and other pastimes that had been invented and were being promoted by associations of enthusiasts. This was the context for research and debates on how to educate people to spend their new leisure and provide opportunities for its wholesome use (Snape, 2018). By 1940, the USA already had over 1000 colleges with courses that trained recreation leaders (Pangburn, 1940).

International collaboration to share experiences began between the wars but was eventually wrecked by a contest to seize the agenda between democrats and fascists. Communists were European fascists' most trenchant opponents, but were internally divided over

whether other countries' parties were prepared to submit to the leading role demanded by Russia's Bolsheviks. In any case, the Bolsheviks were pre-occupied by their own debates about whether bourgeois sports and culture would have any place in socialist societies. Communist countries did not compete in any Olympic Games until 1952. Between 1928 and 1937, the Soviet Union organized five alternative International Spartakiads.

Other features of the inter-war political landscape in Europe and North America helped to make leisure a high-profile public issue. This was when the franchise was extended to all adult citizens, men and women, in most European countries. Trade unions and the political parties that they supported were campaigning for reductions in working time, often in a context of high unemployment. This created receptive audiences for visions of a future leisure society. Existing provisions by commerce and voluntary associations whetted appetites for a further expansion of free time. Meanwhile in Europe, an inter-war context of political paralysis among squabbling parties led to democracy's replacement in country-after-country by strong leaders who claimed to represent their nations, and the battle between democrats and fascists made international collaboration by leisure scholars impossible to sustain.

In Europe, the Geneva-based International Labour Office organized three international conferences on free time which were held in France and Belgium between 1929 and 1935 when the series ended amid fascists' and democrats' attempts to control the agenda. The USA's National Recreation Association launched a separate initiative with a conference preceding the 1932 summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. The success of this conference led to an agreement on a repeat during the run-up to the next Olympics which were scheduled for Berlin in 1936. The preceding recreation conference was in Hamburg and was turned into a celebration of the achievements of Germany's fascism (World Congress, Leisure Time and Recreation, 1936). Representatives of fascist countries gained control over this series of events and held a subsequent recreation conference in Rome in 1938. A further conference was planned for Osaka in 1940, but had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe and an intensification of the Sino-Japanese war (Tano, 2010). After Hamburg, representatives from democratic countries withdrew from this series of events.

Democrats approved of governments providing money and recreation facilities, but favoured provisions being in the hands of voluntary associations, thereby dispersing power, helping to create pluralist societies in which political parties could compete for support. Fascists believed that building strong societies in which individuals could flourish required all associations – businesses, trade unions, and youth movements for example – to be subject to control by states, parties, and leaders that represented their nations. Leisure scholars did not need to take sides. Domestic and international political binaries amplified their voices.

1945–1989

The Cold War was partly an arms race but could not be settled on battlefields since each side was a nuclear power and attack by either risked mutually assured destruction. Thus, this war was essentially a struggle for hearts and minds, and ultimately what mattered was each system's ability to convince its own citizens that they led the superior lives.

The West's preferred measure of social and economic progress was gross domestic product per capita (GDP). There is continuing debate over how to measure GDP and exactly what it measures, but throughout the Cold War it showed that the West's citizens enjoyed the highest standards of living which were rising decade-on-decade. This meant that past trends could continue, specifically reductions in working time while real incomes rose, thus enabling affluent citizens to devote more time and money to their preferred leisure tastes and interests. The outcome was to be some kind of leisure society in which leisure tastes, interests and relationships became pivotal, as work had been in the past. Unlike pre-1939, among the West's leisure scholars in the 1960s and 70s, the forecast of a leisure society had more sceptics than supporters. The latter included Best (1973, 1978), Dumazedier (1967), and Neulinger (1990). Their critics were more numerous and included Godbey (1975), Linder (1970), Seabrook (1988), and Wilensky (1963). Veal (2011, 2012) has systematically reviewed scholarly references to a leisure society from the 1960s onwards. He noted how such references declined in frequency during the 1980s, then became rare. He has recently asked, "Whatever happened to the leisure society?" (Veal, 2019). By then leisure scholars had spent nearly three decades speaking only to one another.

The answer to Veal's "whatever happened" question is that the amplifying binary has become distant history. During the Cold War, as in the 1920s and 30s, leisure scholars did not need to possess any explicit or even private political convictions. The Cold War context acted as an echo chamber which made their work politically relevant and won wider audiences. The beneficiaries of the West's leisure society were to be sovereign individual workers, citizens, voters, and consumers. They would have more scope for choice, self-development, and self-actualization, and the quality of life for all would be enhanced. Leisure scholars sought optimal ways in which citizens could realize the benefits of leisure. This could be through regular "flow" experiences, where challenges stretch participants' skills to the utmost (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), or serious leisure careers in which individuals gain inner pride and social reputations for their ever-widening knowledge and expertise.

Communism had its own vision of the good life. Prior to 1939, the countries had been economically and socially backward. The priority was to develop basic industries – food, iron and steel, and electricity. All labour was needed. Employees typically gained access to housing and welfare through their work collectives. Goods and services were priced within everyone's means. This meant that there were shortages of everything, including labour. Queueing was necessary for daily items such as bread and milk. For housing, cars, and washing machines, it was necessary to join a waiting list. There was no consumer advertising. All organized free time was under the auspices of the state and communist party (see Riordan, 1982).

A priority was to deliver sport and culture to everyone. The facilities that this required were built in cities, towns, and rural centres. There were after-school and holiday provisions for children organized by the Octobrists for those under nine, the Pioneers for 9–16-year-olds, then the Komsomol, the main communist party youth organization. The latter organized visits to fraternal countries and work brigades, in which young people could help to build their countries' futures. Enterprises and trade unions operated vacation centres, typically in upland areas, but sometimes along a coast. The end result was to be a classless way of life in which divisions between town and countryside would

gradually be eroded (see Vitanyi, 1981). In the future, when everyone's needs could be met, a condition of plenitude, grounds for conflict over distribution would disappear and a communist golden age would be born, delivering a way of life superior to the class-riven consumer societies of the West. Measuring progress towards communism's good life clearly required different metrics than GDP per capita, quantities of work-free time, money spent in this time, and participation rates in different free-time activities. Scholars who studied their people's ways of life from within the communist countries were often sceptical, increasingly blatantly during the 1980s (Filipcova, 1990; Jung, 1990, 1994), just as the West's leisure scholars doubted whether a leisure society would ever materialize. However, unlike in the West, since 1989, there has been an enduring nostalgia among older citizens in former communist lands for a way of life that has been lost (for example, see Clark, 2019). While the system survived, the authorities were able to show that when they wished to do so, communist countries could out-perform the West at its own sports and forms of high culture. Some communist countries, most notably the German Democratic Republic, were spectacularly successful in successive Olympic Games (see Riordan, 1980). Orchestras and dance companies based in Moscow and Leningrad won international acclaim.

Post-communism

Sporting and cultural successes became relatively sparse for former communist countries during the decade following the collapse of their system. The West had won the Cold War. This was partly due to NATO's ability to out-spend the Warsaw Pact on nuclear and conventional arms. It was also due to an appetite for Western leisure on the east of the Iron Curtain, especially by young people who adopted the music and fashions as symbols of a desire for change in their countries. More crucially, the Soviet leadership became weary of supporting puppet regimes in Central and South-East Europe. The key event in 1989 was not the iconic fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, but the elections in Poland on June 4 when Solidarity won all but one of the seats in the Sejm and Senate that were up for election. Poland's communist elite were devastated by their lack of public support. Poland waited to see whether Soviet tanks would arrive in Warsaw as in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. Once Poland had formed a Solidarity government without outside intervention, dissidents began to mobilize throughout Central Europe. They were not demanding the replacement of socialism with capitalism, "honest robbery" privatizations in which state assets were sold cheaply to families and cronies of old and new political elites, let alone selling their countries' assets to foreigners, or dismantling state welfare. The "revolutions from below" were nationalist (see Roberts, 2012a). Solidarity wanted Poland's industries to be run by and for Polish workers. Germans wanted the unification of their nation and its territory. The nationalist impulse was most evident in how quickly Yugoslavia split, and the "velvet divorce" between Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 1993.

Soviet citizens experienced a "revolution from above". A split in the communist leadership was won by withdrawing Russia from the Soviet Union, which left Soviet leaders without territory or institutions to govern. The remaining Soviet republics had little option but to declare independence in 1991.

The result of suddenly dismantling the planning apparatuses that had linked production and distribution throughout the Soviet bloc was a rapid economic downturn followed by hyper-inflation and states running out of "hard" currency. State spending on sport ad culture was an early casualty. The only possible rescuer – the global market economy – was willing to act as saviour. Thus, the capitalist market economy embraced the former communist bloc, then, with its Cold War alternative vanquished, spread throughout almost all the rest of the world.

Thus in 1992, the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, was able to proclaim (sceptically) "the end of history" with the capitalist market economy and liberal democracy destined to spread all over the world. He has proved correct about the market economy. Information and communication technologies have intensified globalization. However, the spread of liberal democracy has stalled. The present-day world is a mixture of multi-party liberal democracies, "managed" democracies, and dynastic autocracies. In 1996, another American political scientist, Samuel Huntington, predicted a renewed clash of older civilizations, initially the West versus Islam, though in practice most violent and sustained clashes have been between Islamic fundamentalists and other Islams which ally with the West. However, Islamic, like other religious and historically rooted cultures, are not being swept aside by Western consumerism. The global market and information enter countries only in so far as national governments allow, and purveyors of goods and services are obliged to adapt to local tastes and customs. The outcome, at present, is a world of multiple modernities. Collectively this diverse global community faces a once looming, now present challenge – the sustainability of how we all live and reproduce on planet earth.

In the West capitalism has lost its rival system with which it needed to compete by giving citizens what they felt was a superior way of life. The results have been work intensification – not necessarily longer hours, but the pressure to do more in the same hours, chronic job insecurity especially in new technology sectors (see McKinlay & Smith, 2009), work at irregular hours, and stagnating real incomes (Roberts, 2012b). Busyness has replaced Veblen's (1899/1953) conspicuous consumption as a status signifier (Bellezza et al., 2017; Bittman et al., 2009; Gershuny, 2005; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018; Wajcman, 2015). There have been advocates of slowing down (Hohlbaum, 2009; Honore, 2004, 2008), and some individuals have opted to downshift, to benefit from time rich lives and accept reduced incomes (Horning et al., 1995), but these have not been trend-setters. Some of Marxism's predictions are proving correct. Income and wealth are being sucked upwards (Piketty, 2014). Capitalism is expanding into geographical territories from which it was once excluded, and into business sectors that were once public service, including the provision of leisure services. Major voluntary associations are now run as if they were profit-seeking businesses (Roberts, 2016). New technology social media enterprises have joined the world's top companies in terms of stock market value. They manage to make money when people spend time purposelessly with social media or more general web surfing (Zizek, 2019). The leisure of the mid-twentieth century has disappeared into a broader category of consumer goods and services (Cross, 1993), located mostly in what has been called "the experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). The missing Marxist prediction is a revolutionary antithesis.

Into a wilderness: the globalization of leisure studies

The global market economy has created new middle classes throughout the world, served by enlarged higher education systems whose scholars have access to information technologies that enable them to participate in international specialist networks. Leisure studies, like many other academic specialisms, has experienced an influx of contributors from South America, Southern Africa and, in the case of leisure studies, especially from Asia. Paradoxically, in its original European and North American bases, leisure studies has weakened, not necessarily in numerical terms, though most research centres that monitored the people's ways of life in communist countries have closed, but through the loss of the coherence formerly built in binary international political contexts. Meanwhile, leisure has failed to become a high-profile domestic political issue in Western countries. In so far as Castells (1977) was correct in predicting that the focus of the political left would shift from production to consumption issues, the public services that are prioritized are health, education, and housing, not leisure spaces and places.

Western leisure researchers have tended to fragment into specialists on sport, tourism, events, and so on, either producing critical commentaries or conducting quasi-market research for their leisure industries. Scholars from the emerging market economies have contributed to these specialisms as their countries have become major consumers and suppliers of leisure goods and services. China now sends more tourists abroad than any other country. India's Bollywood produces more films than Hollywood. Leisure policy in the "rest of the world" is primarily about developing leisure businesses, preferably export businesses (Noh, 2010; Wang, 2005). These countries are the "sweet spots" with the fastest growing domestic markets for consumer goods and services (Wilson, 2013).

In so far as Western leisure studies has retained any coherence, this is with the claim that leisure is good for well-being, measured by self-assessed physical health, life satisfaction, and happiness (for example, see Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004). This is a fragile foundation for a social science because well-being has many determinants, and the outcomes of leisure must depend on how it is spent. Since standards of living measured by GDP have ceased to grow year-on-year for many sections of the populations in Western countries, governments have displayed interest in alternative measurements of social progress. These usually include self-assessed well-being and also crime rates and environmental protection. The problem for governments is that the measurements, including happiness, fail to show "progress" Although Western populations are devoting more time and money to leisure, they have become no happier than in the 1950s (Layard, 2005).

In the "rest of the world," many leisure scholars have adopted Western paradigms, meaning that they have measured participation rates in leisure activities, noted differences between socio-demographic groups, and the outcomes including various measurements of well-being. This is despite repeated acknowledgements that Western leisure concepts do not map easily onto most lives in the rest of the world (for example, Fox & Klaiber, 2006; Iwasaki et al., 2007). The Western paradigm works with new middle classes in all countries. It requires leisure to be distinguishable from the rest of life in terms of either/or time, activities and experiences (Roberts, 2006). Such a concept simply does not fit rural lives in the rest of the world or those of the self-employed

and informally employed urban poor (Kwong, 2011; Lee & Lin, 2011; Roberts et al., 2018). Over 20 years ago, Chick (1998) found that the word "leisure" could not be translated into most of the world's known languages. Free time and play fare better. An immediate response in global leisure studies should be to cease proposing universally applicable definitions of leisure. These should always state to who, where, and when the definitions apply. Meanwhile, leisure studies has become stranded in a wilderness of multiple modernities without any clear messages to project outwards that could be drawn into debates and claims about the merits and limitations of different political economies.

Out of the wilderness: an emerging leisure binary

The strongest criticisms of Western leisure, and of how leisure is defined by Western scholars, have been from South and East Asia. There are differences in the ways of life, histories, and religions of India, China, Japan, Korea, and other countries in the region (see Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008; Wang, 2007), but their present-day cultures all have direct lines of descent from the times of Confucius and the Vedic philosophers. The countries' new middle classes invariably experience, and feel a need to resolve, a clash between their traditional cultures on the one hand, then on the other, their own everyday working and consumer practices (Chang, 2008; Donner, 2011; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2008; Kee, 2008; Lukose, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2010; Tsai, 2006; Varma, 1998). Many wish that they could discard family and other traditional obligations but find that they cannot: the traditions have been thoroughly internalized.

Indian and Chinese scholars search for ways of conceiving leisure that will reconcile the acknowledged material benefits of Western modernity with their own countries' traditions (Fan, 2010; International Sociological Association Research Committee on Leisure, 2009; Ma et al., 2010; Ma & Liu, 2009, 2017; Sharma, 2012). They seek a modernity in which a group – family, community, nation – is sovereign, not the individual worker, voter, and consumer. Time never belongs unequivocally to an individual, otherwise unobligated (North, 2010). Traditional cultures in Asia seek not ever greater mastery but balance – between the ways in which people live and the natural environment, between their own and other families, communities and nations, and within themselves – internal peace, bliss. Asia's leisure scholars need to develop their own metrics to show how closely their ideals map onto the actual lives of different socio-demographic groups. The West has its own, well-established metrics but has no traditions comparable with those of Asian countries with which modern lives might clash. There is no equivalent direct line of descent from the thinking of ancient Greek and Roman sages, and the cultures of present European countries. Modernity as known up to now has been European-American.

The West and Asia offer a new binary for leisure studies. There may be a triad, but up to now Islamic voices have rarely entered leisure debates. However, there are many Islams – the Islams of the Middle-East, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Their main conflicts are internal – between Sunni and Shiite branches, and between fundamentalists and mainstreams. There is a similar split between orthodox and reform Jews, and between fundamentalist and mainstream Christians. A difference with Islam is that Christians ceased trying to eliminate heretics and heresy several centuries ago.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all "religions of the book" (the Old Testament). They all allow an individual believer to be addressed by an imagined or metaphorical God in the sky. Mainstream Islam has no difficulty in accommodating Western modernity (see Janmohamed, 2016). Islam belongs to the occident, not the orient.

An East–West binary can enrich leisure research and theory, but this alone will not create a wider audience. This will happen if East–West competition intensifies for access to each other's domestic markets, to control access to their own markets, and to gain control of as much of the world's land and other commodities as possible. If East and West justify their claims in terms of the respective merits of their ways of life, then leisure studies will regain a political amplifier. Unlike the conflicts of the twentieth century, the emergent binary is not one in which any side seeks to eliminate or replace the other (unless Islam is a contender). Even so, governments in the East and West need to justify their claims on planet earth's resources to their own citizens in the first instance. Failure will lead to legitimacy crises. Avoiding such crises will pose difficulties in the East and West. The latter no longer has a socialist alternative with which it must compete for its own workers' and voters' loyalties. Living standards have been allowed to stagnate, or forced down, except for those who benefit from widening inequalities. The capitalist engine that delivered the economic growth whose benefits could be distributed to all classes now stands accused of plunging the planet towards ecological calamity. Governments in Asia must persuade their diverse populations – the new middle classes, the urban poor, and rural dwellers – that they are leading the best of all possible lives, respecting traditions, and benefitting from the global capitalist economy. This binary offers leisure scholars a route out of the wilderness, but not by offering new leisure society utopias which will keep them speaking only to each other. Others will listen if leisure scholars simply debate how to live as well as possible in different countries, all with their specific histories and cultures, but linked by global markets and information flows.

Conclusions

What matters most? Is it how we use our relatively free time and money? Or is it how we think about what we are doing? After all, democrat and fascist parents enrolled their sons in the Boy Scouts. Russian and American athletes competed in the same Olympic sports. Chinese and Indian restaurants attract custom in all parts of the world. The entire foregoing about leisure since the early-twentieth century has been about people's thoughts. Adding this cultural dimension to the study of leisure is the way to understand its political significance or insignificance and ability or inability of leisure studies to attract wider audiences.

The follow-up question is, "Whose thoughts matter?" Are they the thoughts of leisure intelligentsias? We, the leisure scholars, speak beyond our academic silos when our ideas make sense to everyday actors, and when they endorse or challenge the ideologies of political and economic elites. This was the normal situation of leisure scholars throughout the twentieth century. The post-1989 era which has split the world into multiple modernities, and globalized leisure studies while setting it in a political backwater, may be the new normal, or an interval during which one or more politically sensitive international leisure cleavages are formed.

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